

***Museum Skepticism: A History of Art in Public Galleries.* David Carrier. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006. 313 pp.<sup>1</sup>**

Reviewed by Arnd Schneider

In anthropology a critical turning point in thinking about museums was reached with Ivan Karp's and Steven Levine's landmark volume *Exhibiting Cultures*, which was published in 1991. It spelled out what had been voiced by writers and exhibition makers for a while (some of them contributors, such as James Clifford, Sally Price, and Susan Vogel), namely the constructed nature of western art definitions and exhibition practices in relation to non-Western art. These views, while continuing to be developed in many different shades, have become accepted positions amongst many museum professionals.

What then is one to make of a book that looks at the history of 'display' in Western public art galleries and that interrogates the future of the very institution of the art museum itself? Whilst ethnographic collections have their origins, through many paradigmatic shifts, in the curio cabinets of the Renaissance, they always were the poorer brethren of first private, and much later, public collections of Western art. Self-aggrandizing portraits of rulers were prized more than artifacts of the vanquished from distant colonies, even when the later were put on occasional public display (such as when Charles V showed Aztec booty in Brussels in 1520).

For anthropologists, to get the most out of Carrier's new book is perhaps to read it as a kind of indirect ethnography of the Western art museum, after all, an institution that has often championed art as a defining category of Western identity itself. I use deliberately the term *indirect* because, in anthropology, there is an established empirical tradition of ethnography that has taken as its subject museums, their creators, benefactors, and publics, as well as the broader art worlds that engulf them. One can think here of George Marcus's work on American elites and their investment in art (see his essay in the volume that he edited with Fred Myers, *The Traffic in Culture*, University of California Press, 1995), Pierre Bourdieu's and Dominique Schnapper's famous investigations into distinctions of taste and museums, including Schnapper's insightful but less cited, early study, *L'Italie rouge et noire* (Gallimard, 1971), of Bologna elite families distinguishing themselves by private art collections, Deborah Ericson's *In the Stockholm Art World* (University of Stockholm, Department of Social Anthropology, 1988), or Stuart Plattner's monograph on the St. Louis art world (*High Art Down Home*, University of Chicago Press, 1996).

However, because of the disciplinary and methodological differences with art history, for the ethnographically minded reader, Carrier's book inevitably appears more essayistic. Having said that, it provides both a good entry into the history of some of the most paradigmatic public art collections in modern Europe and 20th-century America, such as the Louvre and the Getty Foundation, and as well as others (e.g. those institutions founded by Albert Barnes and Isabella Stewart Gardner), whilst at the same time enquiring into the changing status of both the

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institutions and the objects displayed within them. The art historian Richard Wollheim coined the idea of art and its envelope. For Carrier this envelope, writ large, is the museum. Throughout its history, the museum constantly changes the context within which the art object is displayed, having dislodged it from its place of origin in the first place. Yet Carrier takes issue with those whom he identifies as the museum's critics and develops his point in relation to the Louvre, and the appropriation of Italian (and other foreign art) in France. Whilst there are those who argue that there can be no place for art outside of its original historical sites, Carrier suggests a more complex reading that obliges the museum to carry the burden of contextualization, albeit one that shifts with historically contingent theories of interpretation.

In fact, in the author's felicitous phrase, "museums allow us to see more" (p. 82). Museums enable us to investigate beyond the meanings to be found at 'original' sites and in local cultures, even taking into consideration the obvious ethical implications in a post-colonial world (such as copyright and cultural property). Whilst it is true that other cultures did not have 'museums,' they certainly did have collections (those of the Chinese emperors rank famous amongst these), and many non-Western, non-complex societies did and do have, 'collections' of prized objects from friends and foes, even though the criteria of selection and display differ entirely from the modes familiar in the West. As Clifford pointed out a while ago, throughout human history, gathering activities were probably universal but the systematic possession of 'objects' dissociated from their 'subject' owners was not (*The Predicament of Culture*, Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 218-220). Thus whilst Carrier correctly and laudably identifies the museum as a uniquely Western institution, his passages on non-Western cultures are somewhat incomplete (p. 84), and it is to be lamented that he did not engage with at least some of the most theoretically challenging writers on the subject.

The book's most interesting points for anthropologists (and those in the neighboring disciplines of archeology and museum studies) come from a number of assertions that are developed on the basis of a review of developments in large public art collections, such as the move to treat museum displays as "installations" (p. 155); an idea with potential for fruitful application in anthropology museums. One of Carrier's main points (though not a new one) concerns how museums almost always narrate particular stories through the specific arrangements of their displays, and how these narratives have been influenced by patrons, curators, art critics, and connoisseurs. This fundamental process relates to the details of hanging pictures. Obviously, which paintings are shown together in a room or on a wall, influences the way that we see and perhaps interpret each single picture (p. 94). Yet Carrier fails to mention that, of course, the master narratives for the museum-going public, as for academics, are created by a multiple context of, yes, museums—but also by art historical and critical writing (with its own selective, and deliberate arrangement of text and illustrations, and positioning of paintings in written texts), and even popular culture (through, for example, TV documentaries and movies about painters). However, unless these wider spheres of society are also opened up to democratic dialogue, involving the spectator-consumer (which is what Carrier demands of the museum in his conclusion), public art institutions alone will not be able to carry the burden of positive social change.

It is in this sense—of engaging with wider cultural history and social practices, of which museums are inextricably a part—that this book will be of special relevance to museum

anthropologists and to ethnographers who intend to carry out their own empirical studies of the social life of art.

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